

The Takedown of Kabul: An Effective Coup de Main¹

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On 27 April 1978, Afghan officers who had trained in the Soviet Union conducted a military coup, bringing Communist power to Afghanistan. Nur M. Taraki, the new Soviet-backed president, announced sweeping programs of distributing land, emancipating women, and destroying Afghanistan's old social structure. Armed resistance immediately challenged the new government. The Army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) disintegrated as bloody purges swept the officer ranks. In March 1979, the city of Herat rose in revolt. Most of the Afghan 17th Infantry Division mutinied and joined the rebellion. Forces loyal to President Taraki advanced and occupied the city while the Afghan Air Force bombed the city and the 17th Division. More than 5,000 people, including Soviet citizens, died in the fighting.

Soldiers, units, even entire brigades deserted to the resistance, and by the end of 1979, the Afghan army had fallen from about 90,000 to about 40,000 soldiers. Over half the officer corps was purged, executed, or had deserted. In September 1979, Taraki's prime minister, Hafizullah Amin, seized power and secretly executed Taraki. Amin led the Soviets to believe that Taraki was alive long after he had been killed. But Amin's rule proved no better than Taraki's, and the Soviet Union watched this new Communist state spin out of control and out of Moscow's orbit. The Soviet politburo moved to stabilize the situation.

The Soviet Union had significant experience with stability operations in maintaining its socialist empire. Its experience subjugating the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (where the Soviet forces suffered tremendous losses) led to improved methods and techniques, so that in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet army only lost 96 killed.² By that point, the elements of its coup de main model now included the preinvasion insertion of an in-country Soviet military and KGB element and the production of a cover or deception operation to divert attention away from the imminent attack. A General Staff group would tour the country before the invasion, under some pretense, to assess and fine-tune operational plans. When the invasion began, the in-country Soviet military and KGB element would disarm or disable key nodes of the national military forces. Airborne and Spetsnaz forces would spearhead the invasion and seize major airfields, transportation chokepoints,

the capital city, key government buildings, and communications facilities.³ They would also seize or execute key government leaders. Soviet ground forces would cross into the country, seize the major cities and road networks, suppress any local military resistance, and occupy the key population centers. A new government would then be installed, supported by the armed might of the Soviet armed forces and officially recognized by the Soviet government and its satellites.

This invasion model was used successfully in Afghanistan. Beginning in 1978, Soviet military and KGB advisers permeated the structure of the Afghanistan armed forces and security forces down to battalion level. In March 1979, eight Mi-8 helicopters, a transport squadron of AN-12s, a signal center, and a paratroop battalion transferred to Bagram air base in Afghanistan. The aircraft and all the crews were Soviet, yet the aircraft had Afghan markings and the personnel wore Afghan uniforms. The paratroopers, who provided security, wore Afghan flight suits.⁴ The squadron conducted extensive reconnaissance of the country. In April 1979, General of the Army Aleksiy A. Yepishev, the head of the Main Political Directorate, led a delegation of several generals in a visit to Afghanistan to assess the situation. Yepishev had made a similar visit to Czechoslovakia before the 1968 invasion.

In August 1979, General of the Army Ivan G. Pavlovski, commander in chief (CINC) of the Soviet Ground Forces, led a group of some 60 officers on an extended reconnaissance tour of Afghanistan that lasted for weeks. In 1968, he also had been involved in the Czech crisis as commander of the invasion force. In November 1979, a Spetsnaz battalion, clad in Afghan uniforms, deployed to Afghanistan and was incorporated into the presidential security forces, guarding the outer perimeter of Amin's residence. This so-called Muslim battalion was made up of Soviet Central Asian soldiers who spoke Pashtu, Dari (a dialect of Farsi), Tadjik, or Uzbek. In December, two thirty-man Spetsnaz groups, code-named "Grom" (Thunder) and "Zenit" (Zenith) deployed to Kabul and began reconnaissance of the thirteen objectives that they would have to take out in the coming assault.⁵ More members of Zenith deployed later in the month.

The initial Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was based on the newly reconstituted 40th Army. It consisted of the 5th and 108th Motorized Rifle Divisions, the 103d Airborne Division, the 860th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment, the 56th Separate Air Assault Brigade, the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment, the 2d Air Defense Brigade, and the 34th Composite Aviation Corps.⁶ Airborne elements would fly in

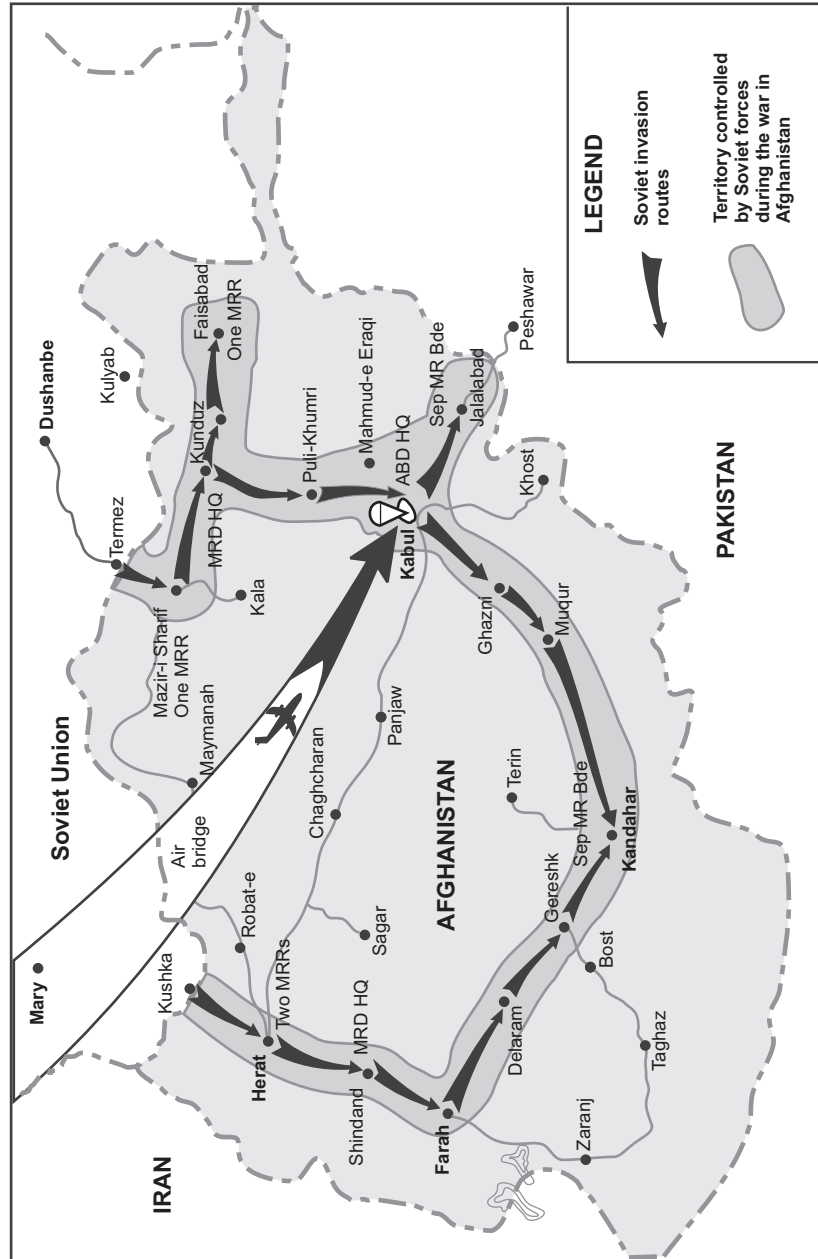
and help the in-place Spetsnaz take the capital city of Kabul and the main airfields. Ground elements would seize and occupy the eastern and western corridors (see Map 1).⁷ President Amin helped the planning process along greatly by continually requesting Soviet help and Soviet troops to prop up his beleaguered regime. The Soviets were happy to comply, only they were not coming to help Amin. The stage was set to seize the country.

Welcome to Kabul

Kabul is an ancient city that Alexander the Great passed through in 330 B.C. while en route to India.⁸ The largest city in Afghanistan, its population was 435,202 in 1969.⁹ Three major mountains push through the city in various directions, and the Kabul River cuts the city in half. Like other Central Asian cities, Kabul's center is composed of ancient adobe buildings set in a rabbit warren of narrow streets and narrower passages. This tight, teeming bazaar is divided into separate sections where large groups of specialists live in an Eastern version of the medieval guild. Leather workers, jewelers, brass workers, and carpet merchants all have their own time-honored section of the bazaar for production and sales. Individual artisans and factories also produce items for sale in the town bazaars and for export.

In 1979, government officials normally lived in the "new city" where the ministries, foreign embassies, hotels, restaurants, and cafes are located. The "new city" is generally north and southwest of the center. The "microrayon" is a region northeast of the city that consists of Soviet-style prefabricated buildings that were produced in a Soviet-constructed factory. At the time of the invasion, these multiple-storied concrete buildings pierced the skyline, and new restaurants, stores, supermarkets, and garages catered to the foreign colony and the growing Afghan middle class. The city was electrified, although power was unstable and problematic. Running water was not potable, although the Japanese were constructing a water system for Kabul. Modern plumbing was confined to the new sections of the city.¹⁰ By regional standards, Kabul was a liberal, open city where women in cosmopolitan miniskirts contrasted with those who were completely covered and veiled, and discotheques blared Western and Eastern music into the early hours.

On the eve of the Soviet invasion, it was winter in Afghanistan, and the snow was belt-deep in parts of the capital. Far to the north, at 0700 on 25 December 1979, two Soviet pontoon bridge regiments began



Map 1

guiding their floating bridges into position on the Amu Darya River in the vicinity of Termez, a Soviet city on the Afghan border. Meanwhile, the 40th Army commander, General Lieutenant Yuri Vladimirovich Tukharinov, met with the chief of operations of the DRA General Staff, General Baba Jan, in Kunduz, Afghanistan, to coordinate actions in the deployment area.

By noon, the Soviet forces had received their orders from Soviet Minister of Defense Marshal of the Soviet Union Dmitri Fedorovich Ustinov. These orders directed that the 40th Army and Soviet air force planes would begin crossing the DRA's borders at 1500 (Moscow time) on 25 December. The Soviet forces began their incursion precisely at the established time. The scouts and air assault battalion of Captain L.V. Khabarov were the first to cross. They were tasked with seizing the Salang pass, a crucial chokepoint on the road to Kabul (twelve Soviet scouts would die in an ambush at the pass). The remainder of the 108th Motorized Rifle Division followed the troops across the pontoon bridges.

Simultaneously, Soviet military transport aviation aircraft crossed the border carrying elements of the 103d Airborne Division, commanded by General Major I.F. Ryabchenko, and the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment to airfields in the capital and nearby Bagram. It took a total of 343 flights and 47 hours to transport the paratroopers and their vehicles and gear. The first aircraft touched down at 1615 on 25 December, and the last touched down at 1430 on the 27th. General Colonel I.D. Gaydaenko directed the military air transport operation. The effort did not occur without casualties. At 1933 on the 25th, an IL-76 that Captain V.V. Golovchin piloted crashed into a mountain and burned during its approach landing. All thirty-seven paratroopers and seven crew members were killed.

On the 25th, the chief Soviet advisers to the Afghan military met in Kabul. They were ordered to prevent any Afghan units, which were opposed to the Soviet presence, from approaching Kabul. Those military advisers and technicians who worked with the DRA air defense forces were directed to prevent actions against the paratroopers' air movements by controlling all the air defense systems and their ammunition storage bunkers. The advisers temporarily disabled some air defense systems by removing the sights or by physically locking them. Consequently, the Soviet air armada flew into Afghanistan unopposed.¹¹

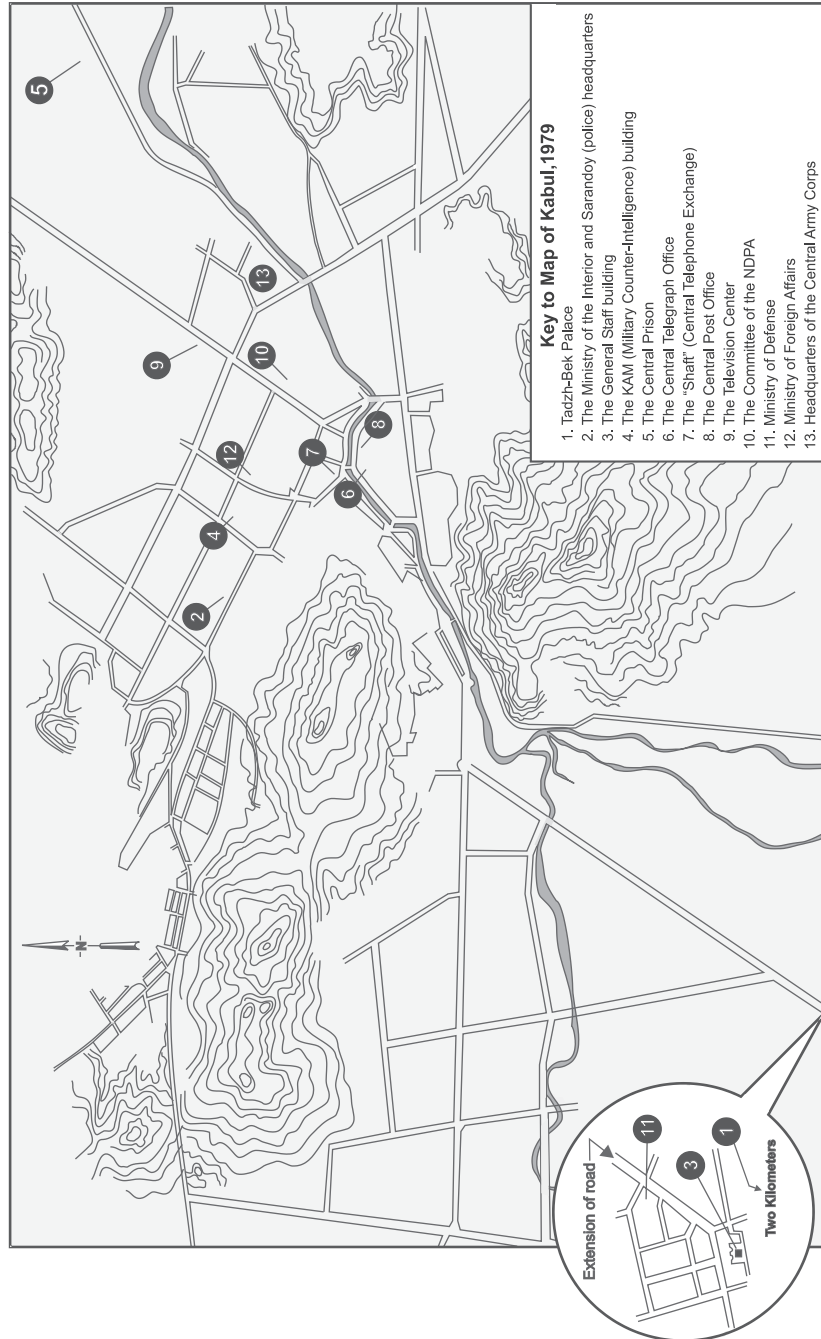
For the coup de main to succeed, Amin had to be eliminated and Kabul had to be taken quickly, which meant that the inbound airborne and motorized rifle divisions would not be available for the mission.

The primary strike force would be the Spetsnaz forces already in Kabul and Bagram, advance units of the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment, and Soviet military advisers serving in Kabul. The operation plan to seize Kabul provided for the capture of thirteen key points: the Tadh-Bek palace, President Amin's residence; the Central Committee of the National Democratic Party of Afghanistan (NDPA), the Communist Party building; the Ministry of Defense (GRU); the Ministry of the Interior; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Communications; the General Staff; the headquarters of the Central Army Corps; the military counterintelligence (KAM) building; the prison for political prisoners in Pul-e Charki; the radio and television center; the central post office; and the central telegraph office (see Map 2).¹² Simultaneously, the Soviets planned to block units of the DRA armed forces deploying in the Afghan capital.¹³

The objectives were spread throughout the city, but the majority was located north of the Kabul River in the newer section of town. Three of the key objectives (Amin's palace, the General Staff building, and the GRU) were south of Kabul, well into the suburbs. The thirteen groups tasked with taking these objectives were normally composite groups of KGB Spetsnaz, GRU Spetsnaz, paratroopers, advisers, and a few cooperative Afghans. The GRU Spetsnaz, paratroopers, and advisers provided the vehicles for the assaults. The signal for the attack to begin would be an explosion that would destroy "the shaft" that housed the international telephone cables as well as those connecting the country's military units. The shaft was located next to the Central Telephone Exchange. General Drozdov, the ranking KGB representative present in the country, would determine the time of the assault. While the overall planning was centralized, the execution was decentralized. The assault commander for each objective did his own reconnaissance, determined his own routes, and developed his own maneuver plan for rapid execution.

Taking the Tadh-Bek Palace

The purpose of the Soviet intervention was to replace President Amin with Moscow's candidate. The KGB had orders to kill Amin, and since he lived in the Tadh-Bek palace, the best place to kill him was in the palace. The palace was situated on a terraced hill on the southern outskirts of the city, and there was no high-speed approach. Rather, a serpentine road wound around the hill to the palace entrance. Amin's personal bodyguard was drawn from his tribe, so most of the bodyguards inside the palace had blood ties with the president. This



Map 2

company-size group occupied positions inside the palace and immediately on the outside. Soviet military doctors provided Amin's medical care, and Soviet cooks prepared his meals. Soviet military advisers were present within Amin's security brigade, and KGB advisers were present in his bodyguard.

The Soviet Muslim battalion held the eastern side of the external perimeter. The battalion's official designation was the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Detachment. It included 520 officers and soldiers plus equipment. This detachment/battalion was a unique organization that served as a pattern for the eight GRU Spetsnaz battalions that would eventually deploy to Afghanistan. In addition to the command and staff group, the detachment had four companies. The 1st Company was mounted on tracked BMP-1s, and the 2d and 3d companies were mounted on wheeled BTR-60PBs.¹⁴ The 4th Company was a weapons company with an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher platoon, a "Lynx" RPO flamethrower platoon, and a platoon of sappers. The detachment also included three separate platoons: signal, ZSU 23-4 "Shilka," and an automotive and materiel support platoon.¹⁵ A mobile field dressing station with a doctor-anesthesiologist and a surgeon was also assigned to the battalion.

Every company had a translator—a cadet from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages—assigned for duty. However, there was practically no problem with language training in the detachment since all the Tajiks, about half of the Uzbeks, and some of the Turkmen knew Farsi, one of the principal Afghan languages. Major Kh. Khalbaev commanded the battalion. It was billeted in some uncompleted barracks on mountains overlooking the palace.¹⁶

Amin's security brigade manned positions within the palace, machine gun positions outside the palace on the palace hill, the traffic control posts on the approach road, and an overwatch position on the nearby mountain. The security brigade also maintained a ring of encircling positions around the palace. The security brigade headquarters caserne was near the overwatch position. Three DRA tanks on the overwatch position could fire on anyone crossing the open ground to attack the palace. A DRA antiaircraft regiment occupied high ground overlooking the palace to protect it from air attack. The regiment's twelve 100-millimeter (mm) antiaircraft guns and sixteen dual-barreled DShK heavy machine guns could also fire on ground targets on the palace approaches. There were a total of some 2,500 DRA personnel protecting the palace. In addition, there were two tank brigades garrisoned near Kabul that could rapidly intervene.¹⁷

Amin's death had to be coordinated with achieving other important objectives in the city. The first attempt to kill Amin would be by poison. Should that fail, the palace would be taken by assault. The assault force had to cross an expanse of open ground covered by carefully sited fighting positions and tanks in overwatch; it then had to follow a winding, channeled road up to the objective.¹⁸ This was a hazardous route, and consequently, the Soviets considered a helicopter assault using the Mi-8 helicopters of the covert Soviet unit at Bagram airfield to airlift the assault force onto the palace roof. However, the Tadj-Bek palace's roof was steep and probably icy. If the air assault went in at night, the risk was unacceptable. Further, the antiaircraft regiment would have to be neutralized before the assault at the risk of losing tactical surprise. For these reasons, a ground assault was necessary.¹⁹

The Soviets decided to assault the palace using a combination of three forces: the Muslim battalion Spetsnaz, which belonged to the GRU, and Spetsnaz groups Thunder and Zenith, which both belonged to the KGB. Thunder was an organized covert group masquerading as professional athletes. Zenith was an ad hoc group composed of Spetsnaz officers who were graduates of the Officer Professional Development Course in Balashikh and members of the Spetsnaz KGB reserve. The vehicles for the assault would come from the Muslim battalion.

The most difficult and important objective in Kabul was the Tadj-Bek palace, and the Soviets devoted particular attention to its capture. In a preliminary move to minimize resistance, the Muslim battalion arranged a reception for the Afghan security brigade commanders on 25 December. They prepared pilaf, although there were difficulties getting alcoholic drinks. The embassy KGB personnel helped out with a box full of "ambassadorial" vodka and cognac plus various delicacies such as caviar and fish. The reception table was well appointed.²⁰ Since this was an Islamic country, the vodka and cognac were served out of teapots to preserve the appearance of propriety.²¹

Fifteen Afghan security brigade personnel, led by its commander, Major Dzhandad, and its political deputy, Ruzi, attended the reception. During the reception, the Soviets engaged the Afghans in conversation while they toasted Soviet-Afghan friendship and military cooperation. Sometimes the Soviet soldiers, who were serving as waiters, poured water instead of vodka into the Soviet officers' glasses. The security brigade's political deputy became especially talkative and told Captain Lebedev that President Taraki was suffocated under Amin's orders. This was important information and confirmed Soviet suspicions.

Major Dzhandad immediately ordered the political deputy to leave the room.²² The Soviets now knew that the Afghans had lied to them about Taraki's death.

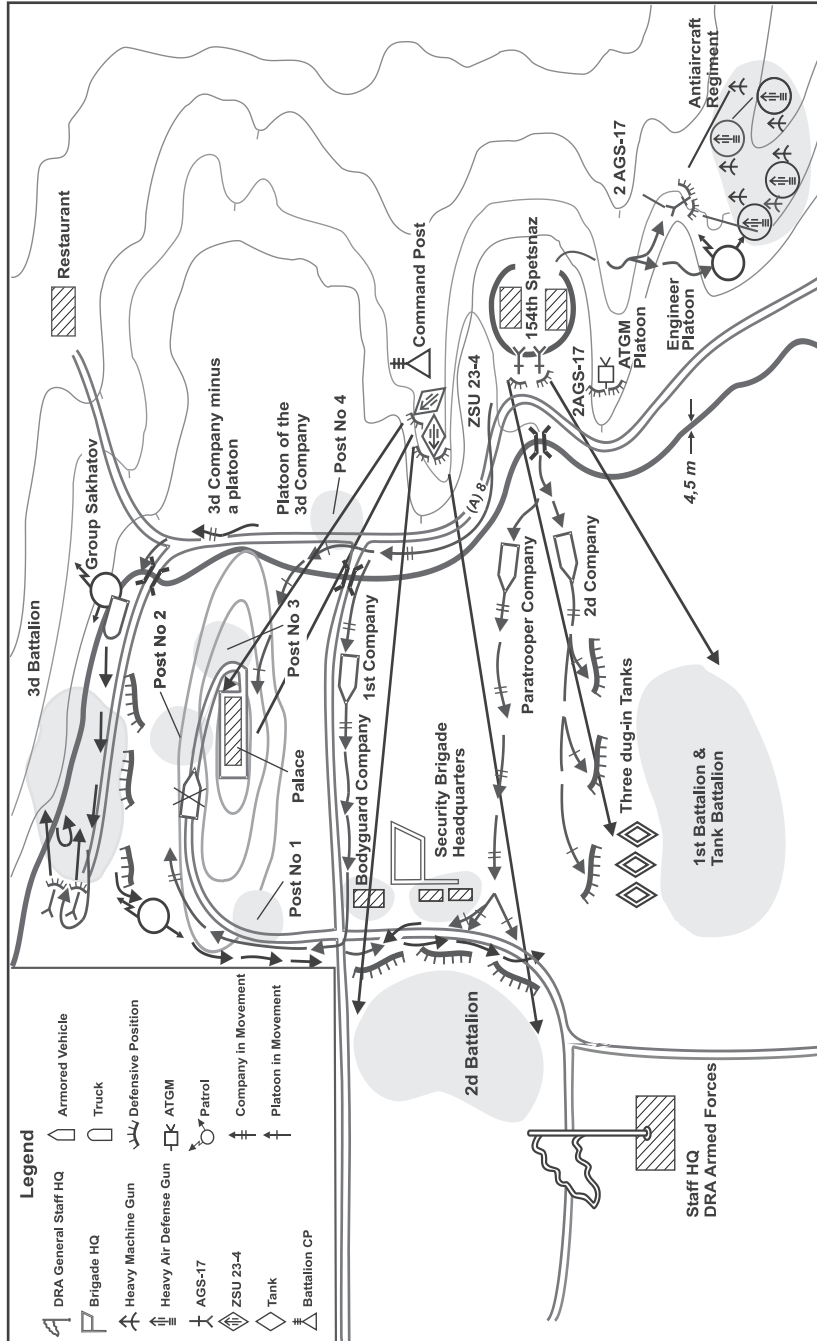
Colonel Kozlov, the senior GRU representative in Kabul, planned the assault on the palace (see Map 3). His first concern was the antiaircraft regiment. He determined that the engineer platoon, reinforced with two AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers and their crews, would take on the regiment. The AGS-17s would fire to cut off the antiaircraft personnel from their weapon positions, while the engineers, under AGS-17 covering fire, would move to the guns and machine guns and blow them up. Lieutenant Colonel Shvets, Kozlov's deputy, would command this group.

The dug-in tanks were the next concern. Kozlov's other assistant, Captain Sakhatov, selected personnel to capture them. He chose three tankers, four KGB Spetsnaz, two snipers, and two machine gunners. They would ride on a GAZ-66 truck up to the third battalion position and capture the three tanks.

The Muslim battalion's 2d and 3d companies, along with a company of paratroopers commanded by Senior Lieutenant Vostrotin, would block and contain the DRA 2d and 3d battalions and the combined 1st Battalion and tank battalion in their barracks area. The Soviet 1st Company, commanded by V. Sharipov, would transport KGB Spetsnaz Thunder and Zenith groups to the palace where they, along with two groups from the 1st Company, would conduct the direct assault on the palace.²³

On the evening the reception was held, KGB General Drozdov held a meeting with KGB Spetsnaz commanders. He assigned everyone's position for seizing the Tadzhibek palace. Everyone was ready. The only thing missing was the plan of the palace. The next day, the Soviet advisers to Amin's security brigade, who were members of the KGB 9th Directorate, led some Spetsnaz personnel through the palace. They looked at everything attentively. Subsequently, Drozdov later made a floor-by-floor plan of Tadzhibek. However, the Soviet adviser to the Afghan Security Brigade commander, Yuri Kutepov, refused to relay Drozdov's request that the palace guard be weakened because such a request would heighten suspicion.

The commanders of Thunder and Zenith, KGB Majors M. Romanov and Ya. Semenov, conducted a reconnaissance of the external area and examined the firing positions and the nearby locale. Not far from the palace, on the hill where the tanks were in overwatch, was a restaurant/



casino where high-ranking officers of the Afghan army usually gathered. Under the pretext of finding a place for their officers to gather for a New Year's celebration, the Spetsnaz commanders visited the establishment. From there, the Tadzhibek was clearly visible, as were the approaches to the palace and the outposts sited to protect it. The commanders conducted a thorough reconnaissance and then started to drive back to brief their findings. At the second outpost, a suspicious Afghan officer stopped, disarmed, and held them for four hours. Finally, after much tea drinking and conversation, the commanders were released. It was a day before the assault, and the reconnaissance was accomplished. The KGB Spetsnaz knew the approach routes; the guard schedule; the total number of Amin's guards and bodyguards; the location of machine gun nests, armored vehicles, and tanks; the internal arrangement of rooms and corridors in the palace; and the location of radios and telephone equipment.

That night, the Afghan president to be, Babrak Karmal, and some members of his entourage secretly flew into Kabul from the Soviet Union with the 103d Airborne Division. They were whisked to the Soviet embassy and late that night hidden in a truck convoy bound for Bagram airfield. They were kept in the Muslim battalion base camp at the airfield, guarded by KGB Spetsnaz.

The morning of 27 December dawned, and Soviet personnel prepared for the assault. The Spetsnaz commanders made another reconnaissance, and while they were scrutinizing the area through binoculars, they saw Major Dzhandad and a group of his officers studying the Muslim battalion's defenses. Lieutenant Colonel Shvets went over to Dzhandad and invited him for dinner, ostensibly in honor of one of the officer's birthdays. The Afghan brigade commander replied that he and his men were conducting training, but they would come by that evening. Then Shvets asked Dzhandad to release his Soviet advisers for the dinner and took them away with him. This act saved many Soviet lives. Reports of the Afghans' reconnaissance were reported to KGB Central, which sent back the message, "Begin the assault at 1500."

At this time, President Amin, not suspecting the imminent coup, was in a state of euphoria. He had achieved his goal of bringing Soviet troops into Afghanistan. On the afternoon of 27 December, he held a magnificent dinner, bringing several members of the Afghan politburo and his ministries, along with their families, into his luxurious palace. It was a formal occasion marking both the anniversary of the founding of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and the return of the Secretary of the Central Committee of the PDPA, Pandsheri, from

Moscow. This return assured Amin that the Soviet leadership was satisfied with his version of Taraki's natural death and the change of leadership in the country. Pandsheri's visit seemed to have strengthened the new regime's relationship with the Soviet Union and confirmed that the Soviets would provide a broad range of military assistance. At the reception, Amin solemnly addressed those present. "The Soviet divisions are already on the way here. Paratroopers have landed in Kabul. All is going well. I am constantly on the telephone communicating with Comrade Gromiko, and we are discussing the best way to inform the world about this Soviet military assistance."²⁴

At 1500, KGB General Drozdov transmitted a message from the Soviet embassy changing the time of the assault (H-hour) to 2200. He later changed it again, this time to 2100. Still later on, other changes were made until H-hour finally stood at 1930. Soviet cooks had prepared the dinner, and Amin, his children, and his daughter-in-law, as well as many guests, suddenly fell ill. Some, including Amin, lost consciousness. Amin's wife quickly called the security brigade commander, Major Dzhandad, who called the Central Military Hospital and the Soviet Embassy's medical clinic to summon help. The food and pomegranate juice were immediately sent to the hospital for examination. The cooks were detained, and the guard was reinforced. However, the primary perpetrators disappeared, and eventually the cooks were freed unharmed.

The Soviet surgeons who were stationed in Kabul, along with Afghan Lieutenant Colonel Veloyat Habbi, chief of the Central Military Hospital, and Abdul Kayum Tutakhel, the chief surgeon, arrived at the palace. They were there at the request of the Afghan chief of the Main Political Directorate, M. Ekbabla Waziri, and the chief of the political department of the apparatus of the main armed forces in the DRA, General Major S.P. Tutushkina.

When Colonel Anatoli Vladomirovich Alekseyev, commander of the Soviet surgical group that was supplementing the hospital staff; Colonel Viktor Petrovich Kuznechenkov, a doctor; and other medical personnel approached the interior guard post, they handed in their weapons as usual. However, they were subjected to a search, which had not happened before. Further, they were addressed sharply. At the entrance to the palace, their documents were checked much more carefully than usual. Then they were searched again. They understood why when they entered the lobby and saw people lying down or sitting unnaturally in the lobby, on the stair steps, and in the rooms. Those who had regained consciousness were writhing in pain. The doctors

diagnosed the problem at once—widespread poisoning. They started to help the suffering people, but Lieutenant Colonel Veloyat Habibi ran up to them and took them with him to Amin. The head of state was in serious condition. Amin lay in one of the rooms, undressed and looking like a corpse with a slack jaw and rolling eyes. He was in a deep coma. Was he dead? They took his pulse. There was a barely perceptible beat.

Colonels Kuznechenhov and Alekseyev did not consider that they might be interfering with someone's plan and began to save the chief "friend of the USSR." First they closed his jaw and then restored his breathing. They put him in a bathroom, cleaned him up, and began administering liquids to force diuresis. After that, they again transferred him to a bedroom. They gave him injections and more injections, then intravenous (IV) drips. There were IV needles in both his hands. Their work continued until 1800, during which time they managed to save Amin's life. But, feeling that disturbing events were afoot, Alekseyev sent the women out of the palace and insisted that a laboratory analysis be conducted to determine the source of the problem. A long time passed until Amin regained consciousness and, expressing surprise, asked, "Why did this happen in my house? Who did it? Was it an accident or sabotage?"

The incident greatly upset the Afghan security brigade officers. They established additional security posts, including internal posts manned by Afghan military personnel, and put a tank brigade on alert to be ready to provide assistance. But help had no way to arrive. Soviet paratroopers had completely isolated the Afghan military units garrisoned in Kabul. Soviet adviser V.G. Salkin described the events in Kabul:

In the evening at approximately 1830, Captain Achmed Dzhana, the brigade commander, received the order to move one battalion into the city. At that time, Colonel Viktor Nikolaevich Pyasetskiy, the adviser to the brigade commander, and I were colocated with the brigade commander. The commander ordered that the first tank battalion be brought to full combat alert. Movement orders would follow. Instantly tank engines roared and the first battalion was ready for action. Pyasetskiy looked at his watch from time to time, expecting new orders from the security brigade. At 1900, Colonel Pyasetskiy himself asked Captain Dzhana to contact his higher headquarters. However, he was unable to call since the telephones were not working.

Colonel Pyasetskiy advised the commander to check on the integrity of the telephone wire within the brigade's territory. The signal platoon

was quickly summoned and the soldiers began to check the connections thoroughly. This lasted about thirty minutes.

Suddenly, a column of four BMDs knocked down the garrison gates and quickly surrounded the brigade headquarters building. A Soviet captain jumped down from the lead vehicle. He entered the building, introduced himself, took Colonel Pyasetskiy aside and conversed with him, then took out a flask of spirits and proposed a drink. The captain addressed the commander of the brigade and stated that the city was restless and that the presence of the tank brigade in the city would be undesirable. After consultation, the brigade commander gave the order to stand down the first battalion.²⁵

Shortly before 1900, KGB Colonel Kozlov called General Magomedov, the chief Soviet military adviser, and told him that due to unforeseen circumstances, the time of the assault had changed and it was necessary to start as soon as possible. After some fifteen minutes, the twelve-man assault group led by Captain Sakhatov boarded its truck and started to drive to the hill where the tanks were dug in. Their mission was to seize the tanks and prevent their being used against the assault groups. Further, they were to deceive the defending palace guard, pretending that the members of the Afghan Security Brigade had revolted and were attacking the palace. The Soviets had to create the impression that the first volleys fired came from the security brigade headquarters caserne. The 2d Company of the Muslim battalion lay in wait at its designated position ready to support the movement of Group Sakhatov by fire.²⁶

As planned, Sakhatov's group moved out fifteen minutes before the beginning of the assault. As they drove through the Afghan 3d Battalion area, they saw that the battalion was on alert. The battalion commander and deputies were standing in the center of the parade ground while weapons and ammunition were being issued to battalion personnel. Quickly estimating the situation, Sakhatov decided to capture the 3d Infantry Battalion's command group. Moving at top speed, the truck full of Spetsnaz suddenly braked by the Afghan officers, and within a few seconds, the officers were lying on the floor of the truck. The GAZ-66 jumped forward, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

During the first few minutes, the soldiers of the battalion did not understand what had happened, but then they opened fire on the fleeing vehicle. It was too late. The dust cloud hid the vehicle, and the firing was ineffective. Sakhatov drove 200 meters and then, reaching advantageous terrain, stopped the vehicle and unloaded his personnel. The Spetsnaz immediately lay down and opened fire on the pursuing 3d

Battalion soldiers. The leaderless Afghans bunched up, presenting a fine target. The two machine guns and eight assault rifles from Sakhatov's group killed more than 200 personnel. In the meantime, the snipers removed the guards by the tanks. When the vehicle holding Group Sakhatov left the Afghan 3d Battalion's position, Colonel Kozlov heard the firing and quickly gave the commands "Fire" and "Advance" to the officers and soldiers of the Muslim battalion, paratroop company, and KGB Spetsnaz groups. Red rockets flew into the air. Wristwatches showed 1915. Over the radio crackled the code word to begin the assault, "Storm-333."

Senior Lieutenant Vasiliy Praut opened the initial direct fire on the palace using two ZSU Shilka 23-4 self-propelled air defense guns, pouring out a stream of bullets. Two other ZSU-23-4s fired on the 2d Battalion in support of Group Sakhatov. AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers fired on the tank battalion position, preventing the crews from reaching their tanks.

The Soviet 2d and 3d companies and the paratrooper company moved out in their armored vehicles to block the security brigade's battalions. Meanwhile, the 1st Company, together with the KGB Spetsnaz groups, headed toward the palace. Most of Zenith was mounted on four BTRs that were to lead out and drive to the western part of the hill. There, dismounting, they would climb the stairs to the western facing of Tadzh-Bek and then move around to the front of the building to link up with Thunder. Five BMPs from the first company had most of KGB Spetsnaz Group Thunder onboard. They were to drive to the front entrance of the palace and dismount.

Zenith moved out. The BTRs drove past the external outposts and moved onto the single road that snaked up the mountain to the dismount area in front of the palace. The road was well protected, and other approaches were mined. Hardly had the first vehicle passed the first turn when it was hit by heavy machine gun fire. The following BTR was immediately hit and set on fire, causing the personnel inside to evacuate the vehicle. Some were wounded. The vehicle commander was shot in the groin with a bullet entering just below his flak jacket. It was impossible to rescue him, and he bled profusely. The Zenith personnel disembarking from the BTR had to lie down and return fire at the windows of the palace and then begin to climb up the hill using assault ladders.

At this time, subgroup Thunder began to move out. The lead vehicle came under fire, and the driver stopped the vehicle, opened the hatch, jumped out, and ran for cover. The vehicle was under fire from outpost

1, which it had just passed. The BMP's back doors swung open to dismount troops to deal with this outpost. The first two out were translators who were immediately killed. All the BMPs then opened fire on the outpost and subdued it. The lead vehicle's driver reappeared, and the column again moved out and began to climb the serpentine road. The BMPs were firing their onboard machine guns and turret cannon furiously as they snaked around the palace. They ran out of ammunition before they reached the dismount point. Searchlights from the palace picked up the assault groups, and fire sprayed the vehicles. Unable to penetrate the thick palace walls, bullets from the ZSU-23-4s ricocheted wildly against the armored vehicles and among the dismounting troops. As the assault force continued to dismount, heavy defensive fire ripped into it, killing or wounding many soldiers and destroying a BMP. Fortunately for the Soviets, the palace guard was armed with 9mm West German Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine guns that could not penetrate the Soviet flak jackets. Still, the flak jackets did not stop bullets from striking limbs and groins, and the ricocheting 23mm rounds and defenders' heavy machine gun bullets ripped through the flak jackets.

The survivors from Zenith arrived at the front entrance of the palace and, joining the survivors from Thunder, climbed through a window into the building. One group began to clear the ground floor while another charged up the stairs in a hail of fire. V. Grishin of the KGB Spetsnaz recalls:

There were shots from everywhere. Lenya Gumennyi stood by a box near the stair landing and gave me some ammunition while I reloaded assault rifle magazines. There were other guys there. We began to gather by the entrance door leading to the corridor that opens onto the rooms on the second floor. We had to open the doors and rush the corridor. We got ready and reloaded magazines. Then it became dark. Before we rushed forward, we had to fire our assault rifles or throw grenades, as we learned in training. We kicked open the door. Sergey Aleksandrovich threw a grenade, but the door flew back so hard that it rebounded off the wall and slammed shut. The grenade hit the door and bounced back at us. Lenya and I managed to jump down off the stair landing and lay flat. Everyone else instantly lay down as the grenade exploded.²⁷

The group picked itself up and rushed inside and down the corridor. Intense fire filled the building. On both floors, the Spetsnaz began clearing the rooms, throwing a grenade inside and then raking the room with fire. They were worked into a killing frenzy, and their orders were to leave no witnesses.

Amin was upstairs wandering around in shorts and an Adidas tee-shirt. He had IV drips in both arms and was dragging the IV stand with him. His terrified five-year-old son clung to his leg. Amin ordered his aide to notify his Soviet military advisers about the attack on the palace. Amin told him, "The Soviets will help us." But his aide replied, "The Soviets are doing the shooting." These words upset the president, and he picked up an ashtray and threw it at his aide, shouting, "You are lying, it cannot be!" Then Amin, himself, tried to call the chief of the General Staff, but communications were already cut. Amin quietly said, "I suspected it. I was right." He lay down on the counter of a large wooden bar. He was still alive when the first Soviet assault troops cleared the room. When they returned later, someone had killed Amin. His body lay wrapped in a carpet. The assault force cleared the third floor to complete the capture of the palace. The action lasted 45 minutes. They passed the word to KGB General Drozdov. Drozdov immediately contacted KGB Chief Yuri Andropov in Moscow and confirmed that Amin was dead. A main goal had been achieved.²⁸

Outside the palace, the Muslim battalion, supported by the captured tanks and the ZSU-23-4 anti-aircraft machine guns, smashed and scattered the Afghan Security Brigade. The tanks and ZSU-23-4s were moved in around the palace as the Muslim battalion and assault force formed a perimeter defense on the frozen ground, anticipating an Afghan tank attack that never came.

The Soviets began evacuating their dead and wounded. After the fight, they counted casualties. In the KGB Spetsnaz group, five men, including overall palace assault commander Colonel Grigoriy Boyarinov, were killed during the assault on the palace. Practically all the thirty-six remaining Spetsnaz were wounded, but those who could still hold a weapon continued to fight. Five Spetsnaz were also killed in the Muslim battalion, and thirty-five were wounded. Of these, twenty-three wounded men remained with the formation during the fight. One of the Soviet doctors who treated Amin was also killed.

The Afghans suffered major losses. Although a significant number of the security brigade soldiers surrendered, the fighting continued after the palace was captured. The Muslim battalion fought the remainder of the 3d Battalion for a full day, after which the Afghans fled into the mountains. Most of the Afghan officers and soldiers were captured. The entire anti-aircraft regiment surrendered without a fight, and the tank battalion did not offer any resistance. Amin's personal bodyguard had 300 men, of which half were captured and the rest killed, wounded, or missing. His security brigade was shattered and scattered. Total

Afghan prisoners numbered nearly 1,700 men. Amin's five-year-old and eight-year-old sons were killed, and his daughter was wounded.

Blowing Up the Shaft

At 1930, Kabul thundered with strong explosions. A ten-man KGB subgroup from Zenith blew up the so-called shaft communications juncture, disconnecting the Afghan capital from the outside world. Aleksei Polyakov, a Spetsnaz commander recalls:

I received the order to conduct the sabotage. I conducted another visual reconnaissance of the target and returned to the villa. . . . I gathered my group, briefed the time we would carry out the sabotage, and assigned the mission to blow up the cable communications shaft at 1930.

At 1845, we left on three motor vehicles to carry out the mission of the high command. I left one man behind at the villa and gave him the order that, in case our operation failed, he should close down everything and leave our embassy, and go to the border guards company. Since I did not have enough interpreters for my group, I requested that an interpreter be allocated to my detachment. As developments demonstrated, if my detachment had not had an interpreter, we could not have carried out the operation bloodlessly.

When we arrived at the target area, I was with the subgroup which would provide cover. We were in a UAZ 469 jeep which moved close to a traffic regulators post. The second covering group was in a 'Volga' sedan which parked close to a hotel. Boris Pleshkunov's subgroup had the interpreter, Khayatov, and was seated in a UAZ 450 jeep which moved up to the 'shaft.' It was necessary to distract the communications center guard post while the cover to the 'shaft' was opened. The interpreter trotted up to the guard, explained that there was going to be a communications check, offered him a cigarette, and distracted him with conversation.²⁹

The hatch was locked, so the padlock had to be cut with bolt cutters. Then the hatch was opened, and a rucksack loaded with two explosive charges and timers was lowered to the bottom of the water-filled shaft. A tear gas grenade was also tossed down the shaft to complicate repair. The whole thing took a few seconds. The timers were set for 15 minutes. The group got back in their cars, leaving the interpreter to chat with the guards. After several minutes they were back at their villa.³⁰ At 1930, a strong explosion, the signal for the general assault on Kabul, thundered.

Taking Down the General Staff

The Afghan Army General Staff building was another difficult objective. While preparing for the mission, subgroup Zenith commander KGB Major Valeriy Rozin accompanied Soviet adviser for combat training General A. Vlasov on a visit inside the newly occupied General Staff building. Until recently, the building had been a museum. Rozin was only able to examine part of the building, but subsequently, he visited an architect who was able to draw up a complete floor plan of the entire building, including the guard posts, based on Rozin's reconnaissance. Rozin worked out a detailed plan of operation, assigning tasks to each member and working out coordination.

At 1850 on 27 December, Rozin, two border guards, and fourteen Spetsnaz from subgroup Zenith boarded vehicles and left the Soviet Embassy heading to the General Staff building. Abdul Vakil', an Afghan accomplice, accompanied them. They arrived at the site about 1900. One group of Spetsnaz went up to the first floor in the left wing of the building where the offices of the Afghan chief of staff were located. The rest of the Spetsnaz stayed on the ground floor and in the lobby, waiting for the appointed time.

Rozin noticed that the number of Afghans in the building—at the external guard posts, the posts in the lobby and on both floors, plus the number of civilians and officers present—was considerably more than during his earlier reconnaissance. In the communications center, there were three communications specialists on duty, plus about fifteen Afghan soldiers with assault rifles. The two normal sentries were at the building facings on the left and right side of the entrance, reinforced by seven to ten other Afghan soldiers. Several soldiers were located in ground floor rooms. Apparently some information about the operation may have leaked out—possibly even the planned starting time. The Afghans were watching the Soviets attentively. The “legend” or cover that got the group inside the building was a scheduled meeting between General I.F. Ryabchenko, commander of the 103d Airborne Division, and General M. Yakub, chief of the Afghan General Staff.

About 1900, Ryabchenko, General P.G. Kostenko (the Soviet adviser to the chief of the Afghan General Staff), General A.A. Vlasov, Rozin (who had airborne coveralls over his Spetsnaz uniform and was playing the role of Ryabchenko's deputy for technical units), and A. Pliev (the interpreter) entered the chief of staff's office, depositing their weapons at the reception desk. The Afghans searched them. An officer, L. Lagoiskiy, and Spetsnaz personnel V. Irvanov and I. Vasil'ev

accompanied Ryabchenko, who remained in the corridor during the reception. General Yakub affably greeted his visitors and invited them to sit at his table. The meeting began. General Vlasov introduced the division commander to the chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the DRA. They began to discuss questions of mutual cooperation. Ryabchenko had not been briefed on the coming action, therefore he behaved normally. As the time for the start of the action neared, Vlasov and Kostenko left Yakub's office under various pretexts.

At the same time, the Spetsnaz dispersed in the lobby and corridors of the ground and first floor of the General Staff building. They covered the majority of the Afghans located there. To distract the Afghans' attention and achieve surprise, the Spetsnaz became acquainted with the Afghans, offered them cigarettes, and talked with them about accompanying the division commander and providing his protection.

At 1930, a strong explosion rocked the city. Yakub also heard the noise but continued to speak. Obviously he had already guessed everything but did not lose his self-control. Then he rushed to the table where a German 9mm MG-5 submachine gun lay. Major Rozin rushed to cut him off. Hand-to-hand combat ensued. Yakub was physically very powerful (he was under six feet tall and weighed over 250 pounds) and was an agile and well-trained individual. He had graduated from the Ryazan Airborne Academy, spoke Russian very well, and was a great friend of the Soviet Union. It would not have gone easily for Rozin, but at that moment, three Soviet soldiers and several Afghans burst into the room. Ryabchenko, not understanding what was happening, remained seated, but Pliev, the interpreter, joined the fight. In the cross-fire that ensued, Yakub was wounded and one of his assistants was killed. The chief of the General Staff quickly disappeared into a break room, where, it turned out, there were some more well-equipped Afghan army soldiers and also a deputy to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Pliev offered the Afghans in the break room the chance to surrender. They began to come out, one at a time, with their hands raised.

At this time, three Spetsnaz disarmed the sentry at the communications center in a short hand-to-hand fight, cut the telephone wires leading out of the building at the stairway, and suppressed the guards' resistance with automatic weapons fire. Then the Spetsnaz smashed the most vulnerable and important communications gear. This paralyzed the command of the divisions and regiments located in Kabul and supported the success of all Soviet actions in the Afghan capital. Two Zenith officers blocked the ground floor entrance of the building's right wing, denying entry to Afghan guards. Two others similarly controlled

the entry to the left wing. Simultaneously, they prevented the Afghan soldiers from exiting the rooms. Meanwhile, I. Pestsov and two border guards remained in the lobby and liquidated the guards at the front entrance.

After knocking out the communications center, V. Kudrik, V. Stemilov, and A. Maskov ran upstairs to the first floor to help Yu. Titov and Yu. Klimov with their fight. Hand-to-hand combat and gunfights in the upstairs rooms of the first floor were long and fierce. The Soviets moved into these rooms firing furiously. Part of the Afghan military personnel sheltered on the second floor. The Spetsnaz did not assault the second floor. The Afghans sheltering there could not leave since the warriors of Zenith controlled all the exits.

In the meantime, the chief of the General Staff's guards were tied up and placed under guard. The wounded General Yakub lay down in the break room. When the fight was over, Abdul Vakil' came into the chief of staff's break room. He spoke with the wounded general for a long time in Pashtu and then shot him with a pistol.

As Afghan resistance was suppressed in various parts of the building, the Spetsnaz collected about 100 prisoners in the large hall. Many were in shock, and although they were all disarmed, they still represented a real threat to the handful of Spetsnaz. Major Rozin ordered that all of them be tied up immediately. There was no rope, so they used ripped-out telephone wire.

The fight had lasted more than an hour. When it began to calm down, a company of paratroopers arrived at the General Staff building on BMDs. They began firing at the windows with their machine guns and assault rifles. The Spetsnaz had to lie down on the floor or find shelter to avoid fratricide. Tracer bullets clawed into the walls of the rooms, burning with a red light and creating a unique show. Rozin began to shout to the division commander to stop the firing. General Ryabchenko ordered one of his officers to contact the company commander immediately. Somewhat later, a signalman with an R-105 radio arrived, and the division commander took command. The paratroopers quickly overcame the remaining pockets of resistance and captured the second floor. The Afghans lost twenty men, and more than 100 officers and soldiers were captured. In the assault group, two men were lightly wounded.³¹

We Interrupt This Program to Bring You a Special Announcement

The reconnaissance company of the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment, reinforced by a ZSU-23-4 and nine Spetsnaz from Zenith, was supposed to capture the radio and television center. For this reason, the reconnaissance company moved from Bagram to Kabul on 21 December and deployed not far from the embassy communications center. The company commander, Senior Lieutenant Aleksandr Popov, and the commander of the Zenith group, KGB Major Anatoliy Ryabinin, planned the upcoming mission. The paratroopers would capture the center's outside grounds and destroy the weapons deployed there; the Spetsnaz would fight inside the buildings.

They understood that success in battle could be ensured only by careful preparation; therefore, they prepared for this operation very thoroughly. Major Ryabinin had earlier visited the site twice. Posing as an automatic switching engineer, he found out where the radio and television studios were, where the signals were sent into the ether, where the switching terminals were, and where the primary and backup power systems were.

Initially, Lieutenant Popov drove around the radio and television center with some Spetsnaz from Zenith and determined its general arrangement and the primary approaches to it. Then he changed into civilian clothes and, along with his platoon leaders, conducted a detailed reconnaissance of the approaches to the objectives, the entrances and exits, and the location of the guard posts and weapons. Popov determined the location of the guard posts, military equipment, the caserne, and the distribution of personnel and weapons. Then the platoon leaders calculated the driving time to the objective on various routes. Using these data, they planned the assault.

The plan was to seize the radio and television center and surrounding area using two axes. Two platoons, commanded by Deputy Company Commander Senior Lieutenant S. Loktev would attack from the vicinity of the American Embassy, cut off the tank crews from their tanks, and then either destroy or capture them. The other attack would be on the left axis using the reconnaissance platoon, the command group, and the squad of Zenith Spetsnaz. This main attack would break down the gate, seize the site, and support the capture group. Two variants were also planned. One plan was to conduct the attack mounted on BMDs. The other variant was a surprise night attack on foot without fire preparation.

In the middle of the day on 27 December, the company commander received his combat mission from Colonel A. Kukushkin, the chief of reconnaissance of the airborne forces. Lieutenant Popov relayed the order to his platoon leaders, and they, in turn, gave every paratrooper his specific mission. The BMD drivers and vehicle commanders received particular instructions. An Afghan accomplice, A.M. Vatandzhar, accompanied the Soviet soldiers. The order to begin the operation arrived at 1830. It stipulated that the assault would begin at 1930. They would seize the objective and then defend it. Major Ryabinin was in a BMD with the company commander. The Spetsnaz group from Zenith was in a BTR along with Vatandzhar.

At the appointed time, the combat vehicles began to move, but unexpectedly, the march column was cut in two by a battalion of Soviet paratroopers. The BTR with the Spetsnaz and Vatandzhar lagged behind. A. Popov, recalling that time, stated, "We did not know that there were other paratrooper regiments in Kabul, therefore we were extremely surprised and did not understand where these paratroopers came from." The reconnaissance company arrived at the objective at the designated time. The paratroopers attacked the objective on two axes, knocked down the gate, and shot the sentries. They attacked with RPG-18 hand-held antitank grenade launchers and destroyed three tanks and a BMP. The paratroopers captured another tank and took the crew captive. The rest of the tanks and BMPs—there were eleven tanks and four BMPs on the objective—did not offer any resistance. Not one Afghan tank fired its main gun, although all the weapons were loaded and the crews had been on combat alert since 1700. They were not told whom they were to fight against. They simply fired their machine guns, then drove away from the objective and parked, waiting for something.

In the meantime, the Spetsnaz group rushed into the radio and television buildings and took possession of them. The fight lasted about 40 minutes. After seizing the building, the Spetsnaz searched the Afghan radio and television personnel and moved them under guard to a single room. Vatandzhar provided major assistance to the group. He arranged the surrender of the crews from the tanks that were standing some distance away. He explained the situation to them and guaranteed their safety with the change in regime. All the crews from seven tanks and three BMPs surrendered. The Soviets collected weapons and 106 prisoners. Seven Afghans were killed and twenty-nine wounded. One paratrooper was wounded in the leg.

Vatandzhar then addressed the radio and television center employees and, working with the Afghan experts, set up the transmission of a

broadcast to the people by Babrak Karmal declaring the formation of a new government. The paratroopers monitored the transmissions and guarded the buildings. Subsequently, the radio and television center was transferred to representatives of the new government of Afghanistan. Its guard force was changed to a company of the 103d Airborne Division.³²

Telegraphing the Blow

At 2020, Aleksandr Puntus led a platoon of paratroopers and nine Spetsnaz from Zenith as they drove up to the telegraph building. Finding the gate locked, Puntus and his interpreter got out of their vehicle and began to explain to an Afghan officer who approached them that they had come to reinforce the telegraph guard and asked him to let them in. The officer replied that he had orders not to let anyone near the site. The officer said that approximately an hour earlier there had been a strong explosion near the telegraph building. As a result, there was a large crater, and the building was damaged. Since none of the attempts to persuade the Afghan officer worked, a peaceful entry into the building was impossible.

After reporting the situation, the group was ordered to seize the telegraph building by force. The operation began at 2100 when a BTR knocked the gate down and drove into the courtyard. The group's fire neutralized the guards near the building and patrolling the premises. Then the paratroopers and Spetsnaz rushed into the building and quickly captured all three floors. The operation took 20 minutes and was carried out successfully despite the initial resistance of the thirty-two Afghan soldiers at the site.

The Afghan soldiers were disarmed and placed under guard in the guard room. In addition to the soldiers, telegraph employees (twenty men and twelve women) were on duty. They were all searched and held in rooms on the third floor of the building. They offered no resistance. The Soviets turned off the equipment with the help of Afghan experts. The captives were fed, calmed down, and provided with a place to sleep for the night. The next morning, they were all released to return to their own houses. Neither side suffered casualties. After capturing the telegraph building, the Soviets established outside guard posts to control the building entrances.³³

Taking Down the Police Station and Ministry of Internal Affairs

At 1930, two platoons of paratroopers and fourteen Spetsnaz from Zenith led by Yuri Mel'nik began the assault on the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) building and the *Sarandoy* (National Armed Police) headquarters, which were in the same compound. They worked quickly and decisively. Three open-bed trucks approached the site and stopped at the traffic control post (KPP). They hit the compound with a salvo of seven hand-held RPG-18 antitank grenade launchers, creating confusion among the 350-man security force. This allowed the paratroopers to dash quickly from the KPP to the MVD building. When the attackers were fired on from the building, the assault group conducted a resolute attack and, in a few minutes, had driven the guard from the ground floor and taken possession of it. Then the paratroopers, using continuous fire and throwing grenades, ascended the stairs. It took 15 minutes to seize the remaining floors. The Afghans, not understanding what was happening, were demoralized, and the resistance stopped.

During the gunfight, Captain Anatoliy Muranov of Zenith was shot through both thighs. Major V. Sisin, the MVD adviser, attempted to help him and took him to the embassy medical clinic where Muranov died of trauma and loss of blood. A large number of Afghans were taken captive. The Soviet MVD advisers assisted the paratroopers and Spetsnaz.

Kosogorskiy, the MVD senior adviser, ordered the arrest of Minister of Internal Affairs A. Sh. Payman, but he was not in the MVD building. Payman, still in his underwear, ran to the residence of Soviet MVD advisers where Major N. Nazarov discovered him. On the morning of the following day, Payman was brought to the operations directing staff. General B.S. Ivanov had him write a message to the Afghan people appealing to them to preserve calm and order in the country. At 1400 on 28 December, his message was broadcast on the radio. On 29 December, new Minister of Internal Affairs S.M. Gulyabzoy and the new commander of the *Sarandoy*, Lieutenant Colonel Asgar, arrived at the MVD building and began work. They had been Amin's prisoners in the Pul-e Charki prison.³⁴

Taking Down the Central Army Corps Headquarters

The headquarters of the Afghan Central Army Corps (CAC) and its security subunit were situated in the building complex known as the

“House of the People.” In all, there were over 1,000 men with artillery, BTRs, and small arms. A company of paratroopers, six Spetsnaz from Zenith, and six Soviet military advisers were allocated for its capture. Their mission included seizing the objective; taking over the CAC staff’s command, control, and communications; identifying staff personnel who were sympathetic to the new government to screen out and isolate Amin’s supporters; and using the staff to prevent Afghan military actions against the Soviet forces.

The group was split into subgroups. At the start of the operation, the first subgroup’s mission was to capture the caserne, the air defense battalion’s weapons, the artillery park located at the House of the People, and the signal battalion’s caserne. The subgroup commander telephoned the senior Afghan officer, who was a division political officer, and through an interpreter, advised him that Amin was overthrown. He told him that a democratic government had come into power and that Soviet forces were providing assistance in supporting order in Kabul at the new government’s request. The Soviet commander gave a clear ultimatum and demanded that all conditions be met without bloodshed. The Afghan officer accepted all the Soviet conditions with alacrity and, together with the battalion chief of staff, carried them out. The military adviser to the signal battalion commander convinced his counterpart not to resist. By 2015, the subgroup completely controlled its assigned sector.

A BTR and small arms fired on the other Soviet subgroup as it entered the corps staff’s territory. The paratroopers and Spetsnaz returned fire and quickly suppressed the resistance and destroyed the BTR. The subgroup commander called an Afghan staff officer and, through an interpreter, congratulated him on the victory of the democratic forces of Afghanistan. Then he demanded that the Afghan officer disarm the security company and the corps staff officers.

One of the captured Afghans volunteered that the corps commander, General M. Dust, was in one of the staff rooms with ten soldiers and his bodyguard. When the assault group rushed into the building and demanded that Dust surrender, the defending Afghans answered with gunfire. As the fight was joined, the assault group suppressed the resistance with automatic fire and grenades and captured the corps staff, except for the corps commander and his security guards who escaped across the roof of the military publishing house.

The subgroup commander, taking advantage of the lull, organized a fire-fighting detail to extinguish a fire started during the gunfight. He also directed the rescue of weapons and equipment from the fire. Parts

of both details were Afghan officers and soldiers who proclaimed their loyalty to the new regime. By the morning of 28 December, the fire in the building was extinguished, and the signal center was back in working order. All the combat vehicles of the group occupied defensive positions around the objective. At the back of the building, two BMD crews fired machine guns and automatic weapons to suppress centers of Afghan resistance.

As dawn broke, the Soviets began combing the staff building and surrounding area. They detained an Afghan soldier who stated that General Dust was hiding in the military publishing house. The group commander had the soldier convey a surrender demand to Dust after explaining in detail the political situation to the soldier. When Dust was convinced that the Soviet officers were speaking the truth, he surrendered.

The group commander, together with the Soviet military advisers, quickly began to use the corps commander to issue orders to the CAC divisions and regiments. The orders recognized the new government and directed resistance to cease. Dust issued orders to the following units: the 88th Artillery Brigade; the 4th and 15th Tank Brigades; the Pukhantun Military Academy; the 26th Parachute Regiment; the 37th "Commando" Brigade; the 7th and 8th Infantry Divisions; the 190th Artillery Regiment; the CAC reconnaissance battalion; the 9th Mountain Infantry Division; the 41st Infantry Regiment; and separate units and subunits located in Bamian, Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa, Kabul, Logar, and Nangahar provinces.

On the morning of 28 December, the CAC staff intercepted a telegram from the governor of Nangahar province that ordered an infantry division and the 444th "Commando" Regiment to advance on Kabul. The adviser to the CAC knew that Colonel Sabur, the division commander, was the captive CAC signal battalion commander's brother. The Soviets convinced the captive commander to talk by phone with his brother, explain the political situation to him, and convince him to side with the new Afghan government. In this manner, the advance on Kabul was broken up. Later that morning, joint Soviet-Afghan posts provided CAC headquarters security. On the following day, the corps staff returned to the House of the People and to work.³⁵

Countering Counterintelligence

Capturing the Afghan Military Counterintelligence Building was rather difficult. Two paratrooper platoons, twelve military advisers,

and six Zenith Spetsnaz were detailed to capture this objective. Rafael Shafigulin headed the force that also included three BMDs, two GAZ-66 trucks, and two air defense weapons. The group developed a plan and coordinated it with the advisers. The attack would penetrate the perimeter at three entry points. BMDs would conduct the breakthrough, approaching and then securing the main building. Dismounting personnel would disarm the outside guards, and the “capture group” of twenty-one men would enter the main building, disarm the personnel inside, and detain designated personnel. They decided not to engage the security force but to cut it off from the objective using BMD machine gun and air defense weapon cross-fire. They moved out at 1830.

During the breakthrough, one of the BMDs was damaged and lost mobility. The group commander was in this vehicle, and he decided that his part of the group would assault the closest door. Under the cover of BMD machine gun fire, the group burst into the building and joined up with Chuchukin, the Soviet adviser, who had been there since before the start of the operation. The group then began to carry out its primary mission and suppress the mounting fire. The Spetsnaz and paratroopers of the second group burst through the building’s main entrance. The combined group’s actions were quick and resolute. Enemy troops inside the building decided not to resist and surrendered their weapons. All the counterintelligence personnel on the Soviet capture list and some members of the government were among the prisoners. The Afghan security personnel who were cut off from the objective heard the noise of battle and left. During the night, separate groups returned and surrendered their weapons. There were about 150 captured soldiers. The Afghan guards at the remaining buildings and soldiers assigned to the site surrendered after hearing Soviet demands on a megaphone.

The other objectives in the Afghan capital were captured without significant problems. On the morning of the 28th, Babrak Karmal was fully in power in Kabul, which was controlled by 103d Airborne Division paratroopers. Soviet ground divisions pushed resolutely southward to gain control of the main lines of communication and airfields in the country. The capture of Kabul was a clear success. The Soviets planned to hold it and other key points while the new DRA president turned his army to fighting the Mujahideen resistance. This was not to be. The DRA army was unable to defeat the Mujahideen, and quickly the Soviet army was dragged into combat in the countryside. The 201st Motorized Rifle Division and other units arrived to reinforce

the 40th Army. The Soviet army was now involved in a foreign civil war on some of the toughest terrain on the planet. The brilliance of the capture of Kabul was soon eclipsed by fruitless Soviet operations that accomplished little. The Soviet army was stuck in Afghanistan for nine bloody years.

Analysis

The coup de main is so different from the normal experience of bloody, deliberate urban combat that this account may seem out of place in this volume. However, that is the main point. Any military professional who studies urban combat quickly concludes that it is not the place to fight. But sometimes cities cannot be avoided. If a city has to be taken, it is usually best taken with surprise and audacity.

The Soviet coup de main model was markedly successful in rapidly gaining control of Afghanistan and its main cities. This stands in contrast to the disastrous October-November 1956 operation against Hungary in which the Soviets lost 669 killed in action (KIA), 1,540 wounded in action (WIA), and 51 missing in action. In the August-October 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviets greatly improved and only lost 11 KIA, 85 killed in accidents, and 87 WIA. The initial December 1979 incursion in Afghanistan resulted in Soviet losses of 24 KIA, 44 killed in accidents, and 74 WIA. In January 1990, the Soviets again used this model in Azerbaijan, where they lost 29 KIA and 98 WIA. When examining other methods and examples of combat in cities, the well-planned coup de main is clearly the best, and least bloody, option. In December 1994, the Russians ignored their own coup de main model in Chechnya with calamitous results.

The main elements of the Soviet coup de main model follow:

- Place advisers and forces on the ground well beforehand.
- Identify key points and personnel that must be quickly taken or neutralized.
- Conduct extensive General Staff reconnaissance.
- Use a cover or deception operation to divert attention away from the main operation.
- Neutralize air defense and communications.
- Have combat air patrol coverage on call.
- Use Spetsnaz, advisers, and paratroopers to seize key points.

- Centralize planning and decentralize simultaneous execution.
- Follow up occupation with ground forces.
- Install a new government.

The invasion of Afghanistan was a military operation the KGB supported, but the capture of Kabul was a KGB operation the military supported. KGB officers were in charge of taking the various objectives. KGB planning predominated. The KGB determined the time to launch the assault. KGB head Yuri Andropov was the first one in Moscow to learn of the mission's success. The KGB tried to disguise Amin's overthrow as an internal Afghan matter with the Soviet Union acting as a good neighbor to calm down the country and help protect the government from internal and external enemies. There were some Afghans who cooperated with the Soviets, but most, including Babrak Karmal, were cooperating for the sake of their own agendas and political advancement. Karmal promised 500 warriors to support the coup; one showed up. Clearly, the KGB called the shots and made the difference.

The KGB plan succeeded, sometimes despite the Soviet penchant for secrecy. Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan F.A. Tabeev was not briefed on the operation, and as explosions and gunfire rocked Kabul, he called his KGB adviser for an explanation. The KGB adviser told the ambassador that he was busy, but he would give him a complete briefing in the morning. The commander of the 103d Airborne Division, the largest Soviet military force in Kabul, was not briefed and blissfully entered the office of the Afghan chief of staff not realizing that his escort was there to kill the chief of staff. Soviet military doctors who looked out for President Amin and his family's health were not warned that their patients were going to be poisoned. The doctors heroically saved Amin's life and thwarted the initial plan. One of the doctors paid for his dedication with his own life during the assault on the palace. Soviet paratroopers fired on buildings containing Spetsnaz because no one briefed them on what was happening. Secrecy was so compartmented that even the most trusted KGB Spetsnaz were not given the complete plan. This frustrated coordination among the various objectives. Yet, despite the extreme secrecy, there are indications that some of the Afghan personnel had an idea that a hostile enterprise was afoot.

Another potential problem was that the Soviets violated unit integrity throughout the fight and throughout the war. Ad hoc units of

KGB Spetsnaz, GRU Spetsnaz, paratroopers, border guards (part of the KGB), and military advisers were quickly put together and had little opportunity to train and rehearse together before the combat. That it worked is a compliment to the professionalism of the officers involved. Indeed, most of the KGB Spetsnaz were officers.

Fratricide was also a problem. In the assault on the Tadzh-Bek Palace, personnel from the Muslim battalion and the KGB Spetsnaz identified one another by the white armbands on their sleeves, the challenge and password “Misha-Yasha,” and Russian cursing. But everyone was dressed in Afghan uniforms and shooting, and grenade throwing took place over a distance. Also, in the dark and confusion, it was difficult to keep track of who had on white armbands and who did not. When the Soviets began to take Afghan prisoners, they found that some Afghans were also wearing white armbands on their sleeves. Many of the Soviets were wounded by 7.62mm rounds. Amin’s personal bodyguard was armed with 9mm submachine guns.

Many of the Soviets were armed with 7.62mm weapons, although some had the new 5.45mm AK74 assault rifle. Ricocheting 23mm bullets from supporting ZSU-23-4 fire wounded many Soviets. The ZSU fire was supposed to lift before the assault force dismounted. However, during the assault, a BTR ran off the road into a ditch. The vehicle commander got on the radio and continually asked for assistance, thus blocking the command net. No one else could communicate while he was transmitting, and consequently, the commander could not radio the ZSUs to cease fire. Finally, his messenger physically had to go to the ZSUs to convey the order to cease fire.

The main requirements for a coup de main are planning, audacity, and surprise. The Soviet effort depended on having personnel on the ground well before the event. The assault force commanders had seen the ground—they had physically driven the route, conducted reconnaissance at the objectives, and planned their assaults. The judicious use of ZSU-23-4s and heavy machine guns aided fighting during the approach to the objective. The Soviet soldiers were elite, well-trained forces in prime physical condition. The rapid destruction or capture of key communications curtailed the Afghans’ ability to react. The Afghans simply were unable to react because the senior leadership was quickly neutralized. It was a masterfully executed operation.

Notes

1. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines a coup de main as a sudden attack in force, whereas a coup d'état is a violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group. In common use, coups d'état are by internal forces, whereas coups de main can be by internal or by external forces. Immediately after the 1979 Soviet coup de main in Afghanistan, many articles described the act. Over the years, more facts have emerged that strongly contrast with what was originally published. This chapter incorporates new, original source material in the hope of more accurately describing this pivotal event.

2. *Grif sekretnosti snyat: Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR b voynakh, boevykh deystviyakh i voennykh konfliktakh (Removing the Secret Seal: Casualty Figures of the Armed Forces of the USSR in War, Combat Action, and Military Conflicts)*, G.F. Krivosheev, ed. (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), 397-98.

3. Spetsnaz are "forces of special designation" or special troops. In this chapter, they are highly trained reconnaissance forces trained for ranger and commando-type actions. There were Spetsnaz forces belonging to the KGB and to the Ministry of Defense in this operation. The Ministry of Defense Spetsnaz were part of the General Staff Intelligence Directorate (GRU).

4. Victor Markovskiy, *Zharkoe nebo Afghanistana (The Hot Skies of Afghanistan)* (Moscow: Tekhnika-Molodezhi, 2000), 68.

5. Aleksandr A. Lyakhovskiy, *Tragediya i doblest' Afgana (The Tragedy and Valor of the Veteran of Afghanistan)* (Moscow: Iskona, 1995), 82, 107, and 131.

6. *Ibid.*, 134.

7. Map 1 is from The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Lester W. Grau and Michael Gress, eds. (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2001), 16.

8. Percy Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1940), 64.

9. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 161.

10. *Ibid.*, 161-65.

11. Aleksandr A. Lyakhovskiy and Lester W. Grau, *Russia's Afghanistan Tragedy*, manuscript undergoing translation and preparation for publication. Most of the material in this chapter is taken from this source, and if the source is not specified, it is from this manuscript.

12. Map 2 created by author based on a map of Kabul produced by the Sahab Geographic & Drafting Institute, Tehran, Iran.

13. “*Spetsoperatsiya v Kabule!!!*” (“Special Operations in Kabul!!!”), *Russkie kommandos (Russian Commandos)* (Moscow: International Patriotic Organization “Vimpel,” 1999), 54-55, and Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

14. *Boevaya Mashina Pekhota* (BMP), an infantry combat vehicle, is a tracked armored infantry fighting vehicle mounting a 73mm cannon (BMP-1) or 30mm automatic cannon (BMP-2), plus a 7.62mm machine gun and antitank missile launcher. It carries a three-man crew and a squad of eight soldiers. *Bronetransporter* (BTR), an armored personnel carrier, is an eight-wheeled infantry transport that carries eleven personnel and mounts a 14.5mm machine gun and a 7.62 mm machine gun.

15. *Zenitnaya Stanovka Upravlenie* (ZSU) is a self-propelled air defense system. The ZSU-23-4 is an armored tracked system with quadruple-mounted 23mm machine guns. It fires 4,000 rounds per minute.

16. S. Kozlov, “*Kak byl vzyat dvorets Amina*” (“How Amin’s Palace was Captured”), *Spetsnaz GRU: Pyat’desyat let istorii, dvadtsat’ let voyny (GRU Spetsnaz: Fifty Years of History, Twenty Years of War)* (Moscow: Russkaya panorama, 2001), 101. During the takedown, Kozlov was using the code name Kolesnik and is known in many histories only by this code name.

17. Ibid, 105.

18. Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

19. Markovskiy, 68.

20. Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

21. Kozlov, 104.

22. Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

23. Kozlov, 107. Map 3 is from page 109.

24. Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

25. *Boevaya Mashina Desanta* (BMD), an air assault combat vehicle, is an air-droppable, tracked armored infantry fighting vehicle issued to paratroop units. It carries up to nine men (normally a maximum of seven). The BMD-1 has a 73mm cannon while the BMD-2 has a 30mm cannon. Both mount three 7.62mm machine guns. See also Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., based on Soviet interrogations of the surviving aide.

29. “*Spetsoperatsiya v Kabule!!!*” 43-44.

30. Ibid.

31. Lyakhovskiy and Grau.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.